

**Reconciliation in Action:
Creating a Learning Community for
Indigenous Student Success**

A case study report on how one B.C. high school is mobilizing a whole-community approach to raise Indigenous graduation rates



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With practical applications from Mount Boucherie Secondary School's Academy of Indigenous Studies

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**Central Okanagan
Public Schools**
Together We Learn

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The EdCan Network is the independent national organization with over 75,000 members working tirelessly to ensure that *all* students discover their place, purpose and path.

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I. Executive Summary

About the Academy of Indigenous Studies

The Academy of Indigenous Studies is a ‘learning community’ within Mount Boucherie Secondary School, a part of Central Okanagan Public Schools (B.C. School District 23), in West Kelowna, B.C. This learning community offers a 20-credit high school study track available to both Indigenous* and non-Indigenous students, which includes courses in Indigenous history, literature, leadership, culture, art, and Okanagan language, and is available to students of all grade levels. The Academy’s course content is transmitted through a pan-Canadian Indigenous lens – integrating Indigenous Worldviews, paradigms, and perspectives from across Canada – as well as through the lens and protocols of local Okanagan First Nations communities. Leveraging key initiatives put in place by B.C.’s Ministry of Education, the program integrates students and course delivery within a learning community, or a network, surrounded by the support of Indigenous teachers, Aboriginal Advocates or Support Workers, and Aboriginal Tutors. The vision for the program – and that of the district’s Indigenous education policies – is co-created with local First Nations through Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (EAs) and an Aboriginal Education Council (AEC). The program was a response to high rates of Indigenous student disengagement and dropout. Student cohorts past and present have traditionally had low attendance rates, low levels of achievement, and experience a variety of challenges including neglect, substance addiction, abuse, disconnection from their language and culture, subjection to stereotypes, and a multitude of inter-generational traumas resulting from the abuses endured by family members who were placed in residential schools. The Academy of Indigenous Studies, and other initiatives led by the school district, have succeeded in raising the high school graduation rate for Indigenous students from 66% in 2012/13 to 77% in 2016/17.¹ The program is expanding to meet the needs of Central Okanagan Public Schools’ over 2,000 Indigenous learners.²

Case study selection process

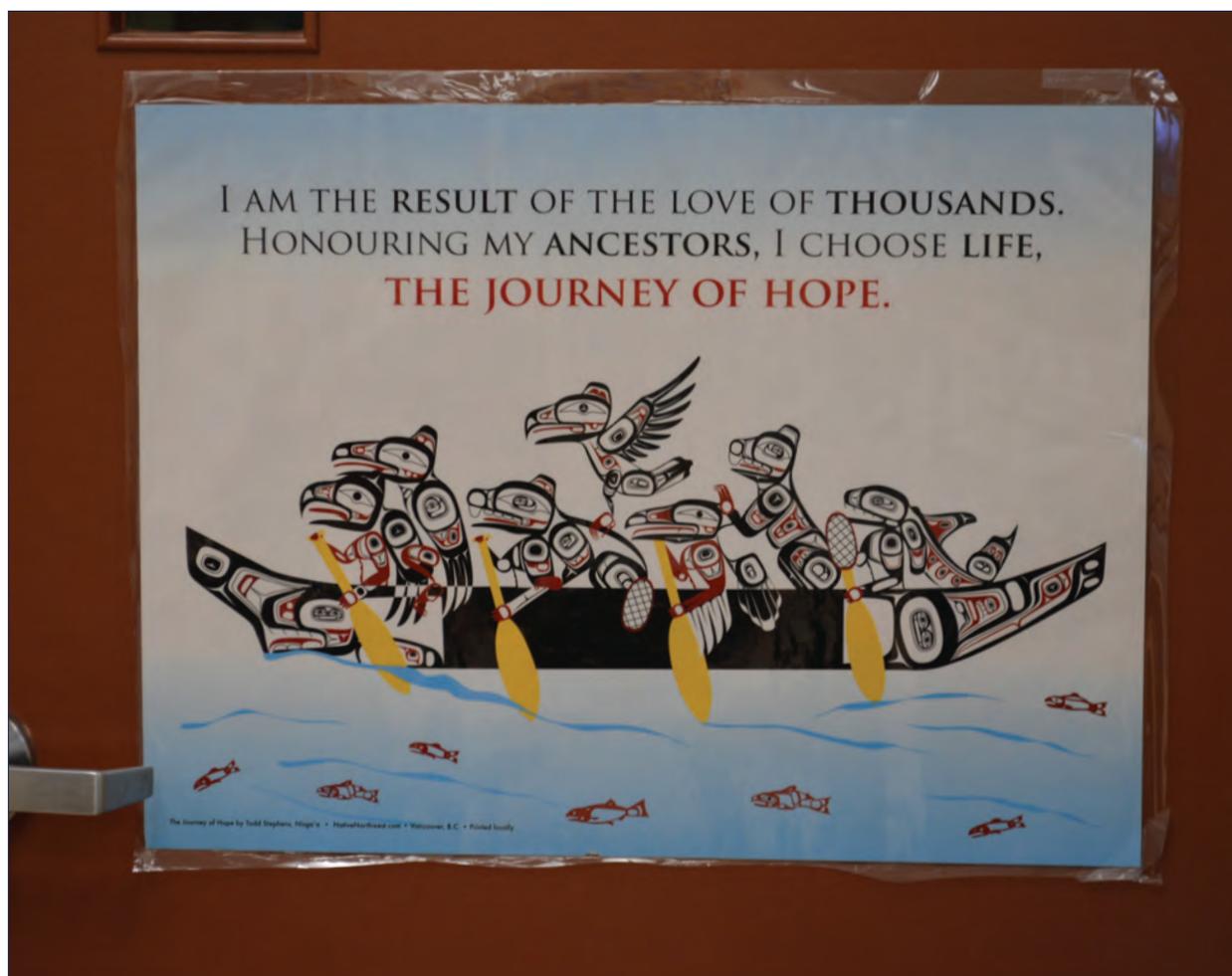
The Academy of Indigenous Studies was selected among 12 program applicants from across Canada to participate in the Indigenous ‘Innovation that Sticks’ Case Study Program: a research initiative administered by the EdCan Network since 2015. A panel of Indigenous education scholars selected the program based on two distinguishing features: its ability to offer a wide array of Indigenous-centred courses within the framework of a ‘learning community,’ and its whole-community response to Indigenous student dropout which brings together educators and First Nations communities in determining key issues and initiatives to undertake. Members of the Indigenous ‘Innovation that Sticks’ Selection Committee also found the program to be a practical example of how a pan-Canadian Indigenous lens could be incorporated into school learning programs for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, while responding to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. For these reasons, the Academy of Indigenous Studies was given a \$5,000 contribution courtesy of initiative sponsor State Farm Canada to participate in this EdCan Network case study research process and share good practices with other education leaders across the country.

* This report uses the terms “Indigenous” and “Aboriginal” interchangeably as used by program facilitators and students, and to reflect usage in professional and ministerial policies and literature.

Key recommendations

This case study report is for teachers and school leaders tasked with raising their Indigenous high school graduation rate, demonstrating how one B.C. school community was able to leverage existing resources – provincial curriculum course offerings and existing B.C. Ministry of Education Aboriginal Education Policies – to develop an initiative that responds to unique community needs. The following guidelines are recommended for crafting an Indigenous-centred learning community in high schools (*see section IV. Conclusion: Recommendations for Building an Indigenous-Centred Learning Community for a detailed list of recommendations*):

1. Develop relationships with local First Nations communities and consult with an overarching Indigenous or Aboriginal Education Council to determine priority issues and strategic ways for improving Indigenous student success that correspond to local communities' needs and cultures.
2. Integrate Indigenous-centred courses within a high school's department or 'learning community,' in order to provide students with authentic cultural learning opportunities throughout the entire duration of their high school careers, and to envelop cohorts within a support network comprised of teachers, Aboriginal Advocates, Aboriginal Tutors, and the wider community.



II. Winning Conditions for Culturally Responsive Indigenous Education in B.C.

In B.C., as of the 2016-2017 school year, the Indigenous high school graduation rate on a six-year timeline was 65.9%, indicating a 2.1% increase from the previous year and a 19% increase since the 2003-2004 term.³ With over 60,000 students who self-identify as having Indigenous ancestry in B.C.'s school system,⁴ this upward trend is significant. In 2016-2017, B.C. launched a new curriculum, which included the main objective of incorporating Indigenous Knowledge, Worldviews, and perspectives into all grade levels and all subject areas.⁵ This includes lessons on the history and impacts of residential schools for all students – whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous.⁶ Five key winning factors – unique to the B.C. landscape but present to a varying extent in other provinces and school districts – that are contributing to this increase include:

1. Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (EAs)
2. Data collection on student characteristics
3. Targeted funding for Indigenous students
4. Aboriginal District Principals
5. Aboriginal Advocates and Support Workers

1. Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (EAs)

Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (EAs) between a local school district, local Indigenous communities, and the B.C. Ministry of Education are designed to include First Nations peoples in discussions on improving Indigenous student outcomes while providing Indigenous learning opportunities for non-Indigenous students. Local school districts and Indigenous communities are responsible for creating their own unique EAs. These agreements are typically set on a five-year timeline that can be renewed and redeveloped, and they instil a collaborative relationship whereby Indigenous communities have greater autonomy in deciding for themselves which measures would best heighten their students' success. This is achieved by first establishing an Aboriginal Education Council – a stakeholder committee with key community and district representatives – to craft, implement, and evaluate the agreement. This initiative was launched in 1999, following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by the B.C. Minister of Education, the federal Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, the Chiefs Action Committee, and the President of the B.C. Teachers' Federation, among other signatories.⁷ As of November 2014, 54 B.C. school districts have signed EAs, two have proposed drafts, and four are in planning stages.⁸

2. Data collection on student characteristics

B.C. collects and publishes data on test scores according to individual schools and student characteristics, including Aboriginal status or identity. The Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA), for instance, provides a measurement of performance in reading, writing, and numeracy, based on a “meet-exceed ratio” (MER) that measures “the number of test scores in which students meet or exceed expectations relative to the number of test scores” in a school, district, or on a province-wide level. This data provides information on Aboriginal students attending provincially operated schools. Furthermore, the First Nations Schools Association (FNSEA) provides information on Aboriginal students attending on-reserve schools. Within the framework of the FNSEA School Measures and Data Collection project, reading, writing, and numeracy skills of students are assessed and compared with national-level standardized tests such as the Canadian Test of Basic Skills and the Canadian Achievements Tests.⁹ Data collection on student characteristics is undertaken to allow school systems to know who their students are and to target efforts in priority areas. Numerous school districts are moving in this direction, and **Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan**, released in 2017, for example, comprises plans for collecting voluntarily provided identity-based data to eliminate systemic barriers to student success.¹⁰

3. Targeted funding for Indigenous students

For the 2015-2016 school year, B.C.’s Ministry of Education allocated \$66.2 million for students who self-identify as Indigenous, translating into an additional \$1,195 per Indigenous student. This funding is used to support programming related to Indigenous language and culture, support service programs, and other locally developed initiatives carried out by school districts and communities through Enhancement Agreements.¹¹ This also comes in addition to regular per-student funding, and does not replace already-funded programs including special education and English language learning, nor can it be used for curriculum delivery including Ministry-supported Indigenous-centred courses such as English First Peoples.¹²

4. Aboriginal District Principals

Aboriginal District Principals, a system leadership position with preference given to persons of Indigenous ancestry, work in close collaboration with the Aboriginal Education Council to reflect the visions of Indigenous communities within school district policy initiatives. Through communicating with school and district leaders – principals, vice-principals, and system administrators – Aboriginal District Principals serve as a bridge between the Council and the district by providing guidance and support on policies related to Indigenous education and Indigenous student success. These are highly skilled individuals who hold knowledge in curriculum development and assessment practices as they relate to Indigenous learners.¹³

5. Aboriginal Advocates and Support Workers

Aboriginal Advocates or Support Workers are educational support staff, typically of Indigenous ancestry, who act as a bridge between Indigenous students and their families on the one hand, and the school system on the other hand. As their professional title indicates, these individuals “advocate” for Indigenous students by being mentors and role models, providing guidance on academic, vocational, or professional pathways, providing support to remediate personal conflicts and troubles at home, and ensuring that students are engaged in their studies while assisting teachers in building classroom environments that encourage cultural pride, positive self-image, and the integration of Indigenous content and cross-cultural awareness activities into classrooms. Aboriginal Advocates or Support Workers are much like guidance counsellors, but their expertise and experiences allow them to meet the unique needs of Indigenous learners.¹⁴





III. Case Study on the Academy of Indigenous Studies

Founding history of the program

In 2001, Central Okanagan Public Schools had an Indigenous student dropout rate of 70%. By 2011, the Indigenous graduation rate had risen to 61%, and further to 78% by 2016. The district hopes to bring this rate up to 90% by June 2019.¹⁵ Before the release of the school district’s first Enhancement Agreement in 2006 – which laid the groundwork for a renewed vision and approach to engaging Indigenous students – the reality and future pathways of Indigenous students were bleak.

The push factor for doing things differently began with a cohort of Indigenous male youth who were highly disengaged and at-risk of dropping out. These youth demonstrated behavioural challenges – including emotional outbreaks, poor social competence, and aggression – and cases of substance abuse, in addition to extremely low attendance rates and underachievement to the point that these young males were so behind from their non-Indigenous peers that supporting them in achieving their credit requirements seemed nearly impossible. At the onset of the new millennium, school districts across B.C. were similarly struggling with lamentable Indigenous student success rates. B.C.’s then-Deputy Minister of Education, Dr. Emery Dosdall, had sent a letter to Central Okanagan Public Schools, indicating the following: that the district’s Indigenous student completion rate in 2001 was actually a 4% drop from the previous year.

Identifying the factors that have led Indigenous students in the district to feel disconnected from school and to ultimately dropout is unique for each student. However, student and educator testimonies have allowed for common factors to be identified and subdivided into two broad categories: personal factors and school system factors (Figure 1). This aligns with research conducted by Dr. George Sefa Dei, who stipulates that early school leaving is not to be viewed solely as the result of individual responsibility. Rather, it is to be viewed as the outcome of teaching practices that lead to unwelcoming school environments resulting from curricula and pedagogy that are unreflective of students’ social differences, notably in terms of their culture, history, identity, social class, gender, sex, and disability status. Dr. Dei’s suggestion of the term “push out” in lieu of “drop out” reflects the idea that ensuring student retention is a matter of collective responsibility, and that the institutional practices of schooling – as seen, for example, through grading practices that favour test-taking over oral knowledge – can effectively “push out” students from school.¹⁶



More on this topic: www.edcan.ca/academy-videos



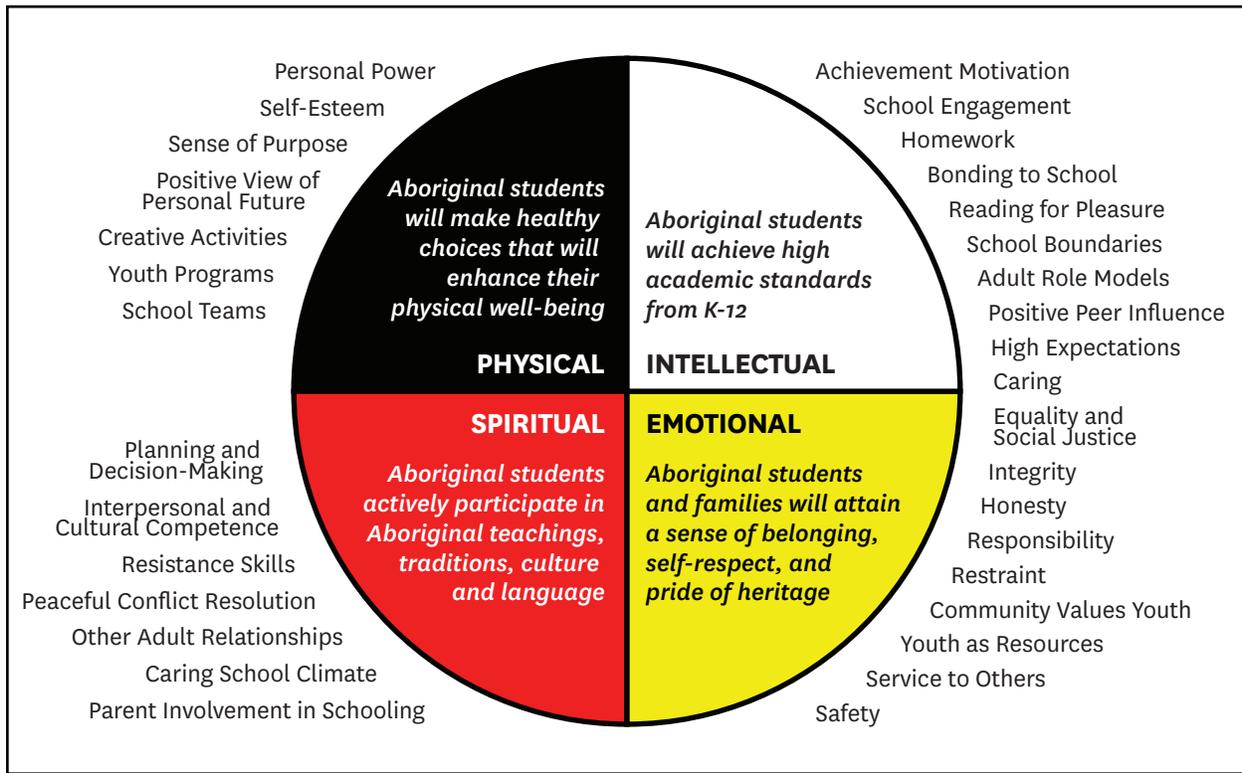
Figure 1: Factors that led Indigenous students to dropout at Mount Boucherie Secondary School, based on anecdotal observations from student and educator interviews.

Dropout Factors of Indigenous students at Mount Boucherie Secondary School	
Personal factors	School system factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative attitudes by parents, families, friends, and community toward school, due to negative experiences and abuses that took place in residential schools. This has led to intergenerational negative attitudes toward school. • Lack of positive role models and structure while growing up on-reserve in underprivileged conditions, including socio-economic hardship, unemployment, and low educational attainment. • Low levels of parent, family, and community participation in children’s schooling, including a lack of educational aspirations for them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of learning experiences adapted to the needs of Indigenous students, including learning materials and classroom practices that are unreflective of Indigenous cultures, histories, and contemporary issues, as well as ways of knowing and coming to learn or know.¹⁷ • Lack of meaningful student-teacher relationships. • Lack of communication and relationship-building between school, family, and local First Nations communities. • Lack of extra-curricular activities that meet the needs and interests of Indigenous students. • Student experiences with bullying on the basis of Indigenous identity and fuelled by stereotypes and lack of knowledge on Indigenous peoples and cultures. • Lack of sense of belonging and positive self concept as a result of shifting between two different worlds: the reserve and the predominantly Western world at school beyond the reserve.

Creation of the first Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (EA)

In order to identify the best ways to improve Indigenous student outcomes, Central Okanagan Public Schools did as several other districts were doing at the time: building a partnership with local First Nations communities through an Enhancement Agreement (EA). An Aboriginal consulting firm was contracted to identify key issues and priorities for Okanagan school, community, social service, and cultural stakeholders – which included students themselves, parents, Knowledge Keepers, Chiefs, and Elders – through interviews, surveys, talking circles, and public forums. This led to the establishment of key objectives for the agreement, set on a five-year timeline from 2006-2011, and the creation of the Aboriginal Education Council – a formal partnership between Okanagan First Nations and other Aboriginal stakeholders from other Nations and the school district to “represent Aboriginal interests in the design, implementation, and assessment of programs and services that will improve the school experience and academic achievement of Aboriginal students.”¹⁸ This is an official consultation body that would allow for dialogue to continue in the long-term. To do this, goals were established in reference to all four directions of the Medicine Wheel (Figure 2), and subdivided into emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual action goals.¹⁹ Furthermore, any initiatives or programs undertaken would need to be documented and evaluated, which the Council is responsible for overseeing as per the agreement.²⁰ In 2011, a second Enhancement Agreement was developed in order to reconfigure goals and determine how to best reach students who remained disconnected from school.²¹

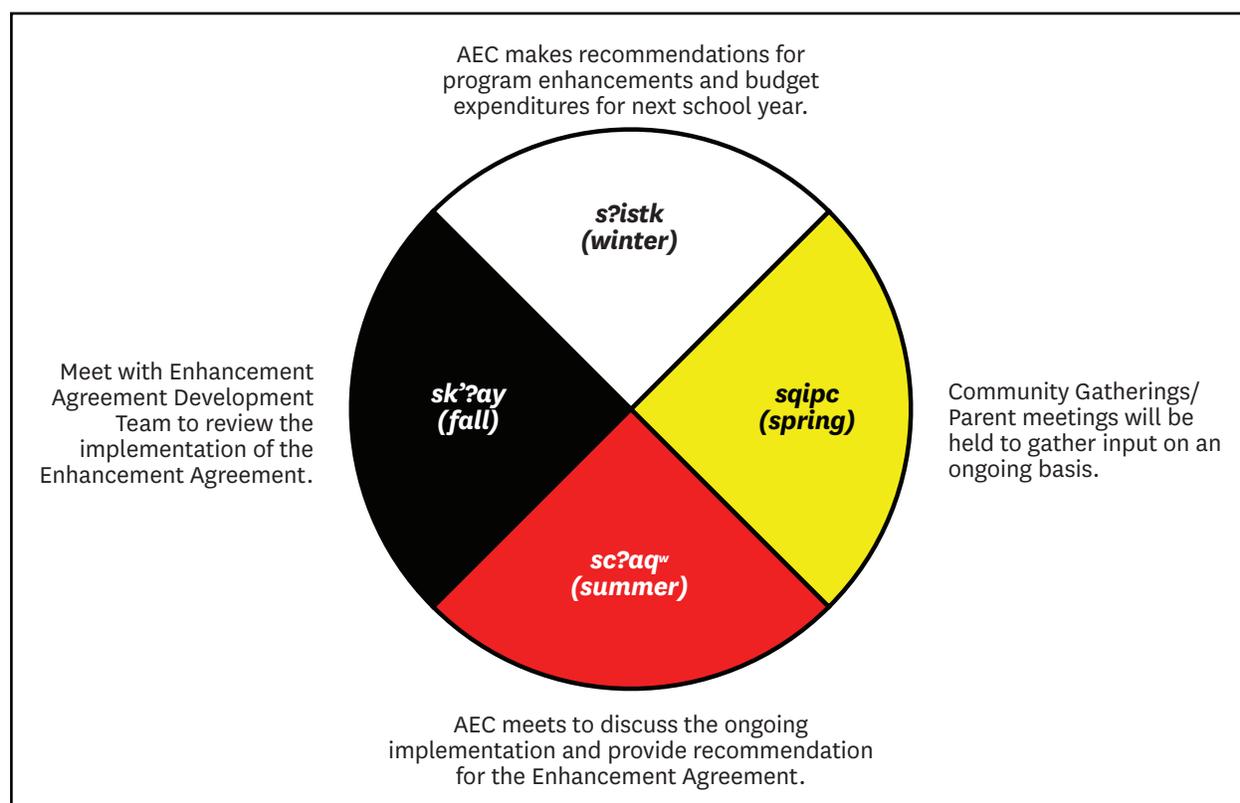
Figure 2: Goals of Central Okanagan Public Schools' Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement reflect the teachings of the Medicine Wheel and support the 40 Developmental Assets^{R/22}



The implementation process is also organized according to the Medicine Wheel, following the cycle of the seasons. In addition to organizing several gatherings throughout the year to allow for community consultation, the Aboriginal Education Council reviews district student performance data, the objectives and partnership dynamics of the Council, and any initiatives as part of the district's Aboriginal Education Program in order to make recommendations, changes, and budget adjustments to better meet collective goals. The results of the Council's discussions are formalized into an annual report and an annual action plan.



Figure 3: Implementation process of Central Okanagan Public Schools' Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement²³



The Academy of Indigenous Studies: What is it and how does it work?

Finding Early Roots in the ‘Warrior Program’: The Academy of Indigenous Studies emerged to meet the needs of the cohort of particularly vulnerable male youth at Mount Boucherie Secondary School. These young men were invited to take part in regular talking circles where they could meet with Indigenous male role models from the community, such as police officers, firefighters, and other community leaders. For some of these students, this marked the first occasion at which an adult male spoke with them in a caring way, and stories related to their culture connected deeply with them. This regular talking circle came to be known as the ‘Warrior Program’: an initiative to inspire leadership within these students. In recognizing the success of the program, the lead teacher-facilitator of these discussions was motivated to implement courses such as English 12 First Peoples and First Nations Studies 12, which were already established within provincial curriculum but required the initiative of a willing and knowledgeable educator to implement. The school district’s first Indigenous Student Leadership Course was also established to expand on the Warrior Program and allow students to gain academic credits toward graduation. To do this, learning objectives were established prior to and during the course in direct collaboration with students (Figure 4). Each class would begin with value-based teachings, and would incorporate land-based outings where students would explore traditional plant-based medicines of the region, learn from Elders and other community members, and play ‘stick games,’ also known as ‘lahal,’ which involves singing, drumming, and team problem solving.²⁴

Figure 4: The learning objectives of the Indigenous Leadership course are linked to the Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers²⁵

Objectives of the Indigenous Student Leadership Course	
Overarching Goal: To develop leadership potential in all Indigenous students for the local and global world	
Courage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To have the mental and moral strength to overcome fears that prevent us from living our true spirit as human beings • Think critically and take time to reflect • Take purposeful risks and learn from success and/or failure
Wisdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware of the gifts you are given • Understand and serve the needs of others • Be flexible and open to change • Be responsible for your actions
Humility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the well-being of others • Communicate directly, honestly, and with civility
Love	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and challenge each other to live by these values • Learn to love yourself
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrate and embrace diversity • Be caretakers of the land • See potential within yourself • Respect the dignity and potential of others
Honesty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live true to your spirit, be honest to yourself, and accept who you are the way the Creator made you • Understand yourself and your community
Truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be true to your culture • Understand how the school system can help move you forward • Embrace the past and understand the future

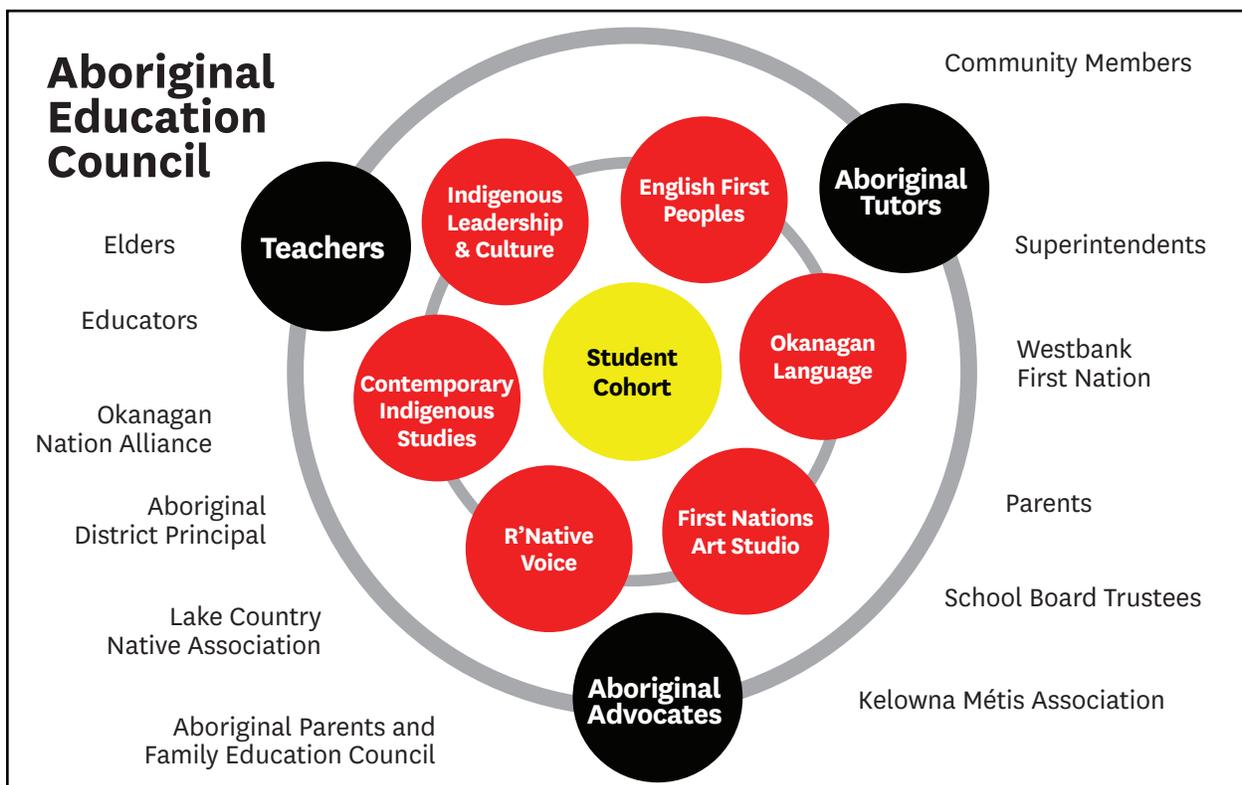


Establishing the Academy of Indigenous Studies: The District Aboriginal Principal, district administrators, and teachers of Mount Boucherie Secondary School recognized the profound impact of the Warrior Program and the Indigenous Leadership Course, and decided to embark on an ambitious effort to create a ‘learning community’ that would come to be known as the Academy of Indigenous Studies. The cohort of male youth had been quick to demonstrate increased attendance and overall motivation: they held their heads high and demonstrated a stronger sense of belonging in the presence of classmates who became like a second family to them. Objectives for the Academy would focus on the following key areas, in line with the objectives set out by the Aboriginal Education Council:²⁶

1. Improve attendance as a result of building strong connections between students, school, and community.
2. Increase the number of Indigenous students enrolled in academic programs.
3. Increase the number of students involved in the Academy of Indigenous Studies.
4. Increase parent satisfaction levels through offering a wide variety of Indigenous-centred courses.
5. Improve overall school climate and Indigenous students’ cultural awareness and sense of belonging through meeting individual learners’ needs.

This ‘learning community’ would come to develop into a four-tier network that places the student cohort at the centre, enveloped in cultural teachings and values provided through their coursework. From there, students are supported by their teachers, Aboriginal Advocates, and Aboriginal tutors, who follow a framework developed by the wider community known as the Aboriginal Education Council (Figure 5).

Figure 5: *The Academy of Indigenous Studies is a learning community that integrates students within a support system comprised of teachers, Aboriginal Advocates, Aboriginal Tutors, and an overarching Aboriginal Education Council²⁷*



On this basis, the Academy of Indigenous Studies is made-up of six key components:

1. **Student cohort:** Beginning in the first year of high school, students have the option to take a select number of classes from the Academy’s course offerings, or to follow a full 20-credit study track that allows them to gain a specialized certificate of graduation (Figure 6). Students who opt for the full study track have the benefit not only of learning about First Nations cultures throughout their entire high school career, but they also become a member of a cohort – much like a “class family” – that journeys together and supports each other all the way up to graduation. This builds strong relationships and fosters a strong sense of belonging.

Figure 6: Course offerings of the Academy of Indigenous Studies for all three years of high school²⁸

Course offerings of the Academy of Indigenous Studies		
1 st year high school	2 nd year high school	3 rd year high school
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous Leadership and Culture • English 10 First Peoples • Introduction to Okanagan Language • R’Native Voice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous Leadership and Culture • Contemporary Indigenous Studies 11 • English 11 First Peoples • First Nations Art Studio 11 • Introduction to Okanagan Language • R’Native Voice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous Leadership and Culture • Contemporary Indigenous Studies 12 • English 12 First peoples • First Nations Art Studio 12 • Introduction to Okanagan Language • R’Native Voice
<p>Students must complete 5 of the above courses (20 credits) to achieve the Academy of Indigenous Studies certificate of graduation.</p>		

2. **Indigenous-centred courses:** Multidisciplinary, Indigenous-centred courses allow both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to pursue their interests in certain subject areas while forming links with local and cross-Canada Indigenous cultures (Figure 7). The history and legacy of residential schools is also discussed across subject areas, through literature in English First Peoples, documentaries in Contemporary Indigenous Studies, and the opportunity to share personal stories on the matter in the R’Native Voice creative writing class. In addition to these for-credit courses, co-curricular activities are offered and co-constructed with student cohorts, including:

- **The 24-Hour Drum-a-Thon:** This is a yearly event hosted by Academy students to raise awareness on issues that are dear to them, including Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Clean Water on Reserves, and Respect for the Environment. Members of the community are invited to participate, and elementary-grade students serve as special guests who can learn more about these issues at information booths setup by the Academy’s students. This allows them to share their knowledge in a concrete way with younger generations, sparking a sense of pride and demonstrating to them the practical applications of school.
- **Traditional drumming lessons:** Students enrolled in the Indigenous Leadership and Culture course also spend a portion of their classroom time learning how to sing and drum traditional Okanagan songs, as led by the district’s Cultural Presenter. Students present these songs during school assemblies and other school and community events.

Figure 7: Detailed course descriptions of the Academy of Indigenous Studies²⁹

Detailed Course Descriptions of the Academy of Indigenous Studies	
Course title	Course description
Indigenous Leadership and Culture	Indigenous Leadership and Culture provides students with leadership experience in and out of school by providing local and global citizenship opportunities. This course emphasizes understanding of First Nations cultures, histories, and languages, and encourages the development of well-rounded individuals with a sense of belonging and spiritual understanding to pursue ambitions in life that enhance cultural understanding and community connections.
English First Peoples	English First Peoples is intended for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It represents an invitation to all learners to explore and discover First Peoples’ Worldviews through the study of literary, informational and media text with local, Canadian, and international First Peoples’ content. English 11 First Peoples provides opportunities for all students to engage with First Peoples’ creative expression and enter the worlds of First Peoples provincially, nationally, and internationally. This course focuses on the experiences, values, beliefs, and lived realities of First Peoples as evidenced in various forms of text—including oral story, speech, poetry, dramatic work, dance, song, film, and prose (non-fiction and fiction). It takes a thematic approach to First Peoples’ literature and addresses a variety of topics important to First Peoples.
Okanagan Language	A fundamental aim of Okanagan language education is to enable students to communicate with others in Okanagan. Introductory Nsyilxcən 11 is designed for students who are wishing to learn the Okanagan language. Through the integration of local culture and traditions, students will develop a level of competence to successfully participate in the Nsyilxcən 11 course. This course embraces a variety of communication skills – listening , reading, speaking, writing, viewing, and representing – in order to reach students with a wide range of abilities, language traditions, and backgrounds. It emphasizes authentic language-learning experiences and the application of a range of language learning strategies.
Contemporary Indigenous Studies	This cross-curricular course is offered to all students who wish to expand their knowledge and understanding of Canada’s Indigenous peoples: their cultures, history, and current situations. Areas of study include: prejudice and discrimination, leadership and self-determination, land and relationships, contact and colonialism, cultural expressions, oral traditions, literature, arts and crafts, and current events and issues.
R’Native Voice	What’s your story? Discover the mark you’re making, the lives you’re touching, and the legacy you’re leaving. Through the knowledge of Indigenous cultures and a holistic approach to being healthy, R’ Native Voice helps students from all backgrounds become better citizens in this world.
First Nations Art Studio	This hands-on course will explore rich and diverse First Nations historic and modern art traditions through drawing, painting, printmaking, and sculpture. The course will be divided into three sections. Unit 1 will explore the culture and art of the Okanagan people, starting with traditional imagery then focusing on the works of modern Okanagan artists. Unit 2 will shift to the powerful First Nations work of the B.C. Coastal Nations, followed by study of and working with modern “West Coast” artists. Unit 3 allows students to apply their knowledge and experiences to create works of art of their own choosing.

- 3. Teachers:** A teacher of Indigenous ancestry was recruited to lead and facilitate the program. This individual is key to engaging the program with community, in order to ensure that cultural teachings are authentic and allow for them, as much as possible, to take place outdoors and on the land, in keeping with the land-based and experiential learning values that Indigenous paradigms are rooted in. This teacher also serves as Department Head and represents the Academy at school-wide department meetings. Whereas it is not possible to recruit an Indigenous teacher to lead certain classes, as is the case with the First Nations Art Studio, non-Indigenous teachers work in close collaboration with the Academy Department Head to ensure local Okanagan protocols are respected.
- 4. Aboriginal Advocates:** Aboriginal Advocates, also known as Aboriginal Support Workers, are integral to this learning community. These individuals provide additional support to the Academy's teachers in ensuring respect for protocols, establishing learning objectives, integrating Indigenous content into class teachings, and engaging community members to share their knowledge with students. Aboriginal Advocates are also mentors whom students can approach at any moment to discuss difficulties whether at school, in the home, or on a personal level. Advocates have the cultural background and knowledge necessary to respond with care and sensitivity.
- 5. Aboriginal Tutors:** In addition to the for-credit courses offered by the Academy, students can also receive credit for signing up for tutoring sessions with the Aboriginal Tutoring Team. These tutors, often of Indigenous ancestry, are equipped with the cultural knowledge needed to support students in completing homework and assignments as they relate to their Academy classes.
- 6. Aboriginal Education Council (AEC):** The district's AEC is the overarching body that sets the vision for the Academy, as well as for all other programming related to Indigenous education across the district. Student achievement data is submitted to the AEC each year, from which recommendations for improvement are provided to the Academy team.



Students of the Academy of Indigenous Studies learn about the local territory's history and culture through field trips to the Westbank First Nation Museum.

When You Enter This Room

You are **Scientists**

You are **READERS**

You are **Creators**

You are **Explorers**

You are **Important**

You are **Leaders**

You are **Authors**

You are **Team Players**

You are *Kind*

You are **Innovators**

You are **Thinkers**

You are *Valued*

You are a



You are **The Reason** We are **HERE !!!**

IV. Conclusion: Recommendations for Building an Indigenous-Centred Learning Community

Improving Indigenous graduation rates across a school district is not a feat that can be accomplished by one teacher, one Aboriginal Support Worker, or one Indigenous learning program. As the Academy of Indigenous Studies demonstrates, there are a multitude of factors that contributed to Central Okanagan Public Schools' ability to significantly reverse completion trends in a little over a decade, most notably by implementing a framework built on district-wide buy-in to doing things differently and a long-term commitment to working with local First Nations communities of the Okanagan. Discussions within the district's Aboriginal Education Council were difficult at times, following years of broken promises that had forged a sense of mistrust by Okanagan communities toward the school system. Central Okanagan district leaders often cite the need to "go slow to move fast": playing the long game to build trust-based relationships with First Nations communities, consult, evaluate what works, and prioritize initiatives strategically in areas where the impact will be greatest.

The school district has also learned that a strong partnership for improving Indigenous student success is one that allows First Nations communities the self-determination to decide what is best for them: an approach whereby First Nations communities hold the answers, and simply need the school system to work with them in order to implement their vision. The Academy of Indigenous Studies is the result of this consultation process, and it is only one initiative among a myriad of measures that have been undertaken to create system-wide change. Overall, improving Indigenous student outcomes on a district-wide level is a long-term process that requires buy-in by the whole school community, and each partnership and the programs that result from it will comprise different stakeholders and entail different challenges. However, as the Academy of Indigenous Studies demonstrates, a solid foundation built on a genuine commitment to doing things differently allows unique and community-responsive initiatives to come to fruition.

Recommendations

In learning from the challenges and experiences of the educators, school and district leaders, and community partners of the Academy of Indigenous Studies, the following guidelines are recommended for crafting an Indigenous-centred learning community in high schools:

1. Develop relationships with local First Nations communities and consult with an overarching Indigenous or Aboriginal Education Council.

- Develop an agreement or action plan for Indigenous student success in consultation with local First Nations communities. Reviewing current agreements established by local B.C. school districts and First Nations communities can provide key insights on how to establish trust-based relationships and action plans for improving Indigenous student outcomes. Where provincial Ministry of Education frameworks do not exist for building such agreements, contact an Indigenous educational resource person by inquiring among your school district's Indigenous Education Department, or its equivalent. On a micro-level, schoolteachers can inform themselves on the cultures, protocols, and Worldviews of local Indigenous communities by contacting local Native Friendship Centres, Band or Hamlet offices, and Indigenous associations.

- Provide experiential and land-based learning opportunities outside the classroom. Experiential, land-based learning is an integral facet of Indigenous paradigms, and a significant portion of programming must take place outside and on the land in order to teach core values such as respect for nature and reciprocity. To do this, build relationships with local First Nations communities and inquire about Elders who may be willing to share their knowledge on different cultural practices such as smudging, offering tobacco, and hosting sweat lodge ceremonies.
- Be flexible in your approach to students with behavioural challenges. When working with students who come from challenging upbringings – including histories with substance abuse, neglect, and violence – it is important to adjust your practices and to commit to doing things differently. In other words, take the time to know your students on a personal level, and build a solid judgment base on which to distinguish between whether certain behaviours are tolerable, or whether certain behaviours are grounds for removing a student from class or for providing other consequences. School communities can also develop Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) strategies, which are mutually agreed upon expectations for student behaviour.³⁰

2. Integrate Indigenous-centred courses within a high school’s department or ‘learning community.’

- Integrate an Indigenous educational resource person into your program’s activities. For school districts that have the equivalent of Aboriginal Advocates or Aboriginal Tutors already in place, involve these individuals directly in the creation and execution of your program. Where they are not present, create a guiding coalition of educators who share the belief that all students can succeed, and who have sensitivity toward issues of Indigenous peoples.
- Recruit a teacher-facilitator of Indigenous ancestry to oversee the program’s activities. The teacher-facilitator of your Academy or learning community must be Indigenous, be able to understand and have empathy toward students’ experiences – including the inter-generational impacts of residential schools – and serve as a positive Indigenous role model. For Indigenous youth who may lack cultural pride or who scarcely see role models who resemble themselves, this is key to a successful program.
- Frame your program as a specialized study track that allows students to take Indigenous-centred courses and earn academic credits throughout the entire duration of their high school careers. Beyond offering Indigenous-centred courses, the Academy builds community among students through establishing a cohort: a core group of students who take courses together throughout the entire duration of their high school years. This reinforces students’ sense of belonging, which they otherwise may not have. Furthermore, when listing class options in your school course catalogue, ensure that certain courses – such as English First Peoples – are indicated as being equivalent to standard academic credits – such as Grade 12 English. This strengthens the perspective that these courses are legitimate academic programs, and not watered-down or less-challenging versions catered to at-risk youth. It is also important to collaborate with your Guidance Department to schedule courses in a way that does not conflict with students’ timetables and other mandatory classes, so as to generate significant enrolment rates.

For More Information:

Aboriginal Education Program | Central Okanagan Public Schools (B.C. School District 23)
Tel: (250) 870-5144 | Website: www.aboriginaleducationsd23.weebly.com

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V. Endnotes and Further Reading

- ¹ Central Okanagan Public Schools/School District 23 – Central Okanagan (November 2017). *Aboriginal Report 2012/13-2016/17: How Are We Doing?*, 31.
- ² Coughlin, Cammy (2012). *Aboriginal Education Program Ninth Annual Report*. Central Okanagan Public Schools/ School District 23 – Central Okanagan, 1.
- ³ British Columbia Ministry of Education (2018). “Completion Rate Over Time for Aboriginal and All Students.” *Completion Rates*. See also: CBC News (13 January 2018). “High school graduation rates up for B.C.’s Indigenous, special needs students.”
- ⁴ British Columbia Ministry of Education. “Aboriginal Education in British Columbia.” Accessible from: www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/ways-to-learn/aboriginal-education
- ⁵ British Columbia Ministry of Education. “Introduction to British Columbia’s Redesigned Curriculum,” 7-88.
- ⁶ See: First Nations Education Steering Committee. “Indian Residential Schools and Reconciliation Resources.” Accessible from: <http://www.fnesc.ca/irsr>
- ⁷ British Columbia Ministry of Education. “Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements.”
- ⁸ British Columbia Ministry of Education. “Enhancement Agreements as of November 2014” and “School Districts with an Enhancement Agreement.”
- ⁹ Richards, John, and Megan Scott (December 2009). “Aboriginal Education: Strengthening the Foundations.” *CPRN Research Report*. Canadian Policy Research Networks, 22-28.
- ¹⁰ Ontario Ministry of Education (2017). *Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan*, 19.
- ¹¹ British Columbia Ministry of Education (2015). “Targeted Funding for Aboriginal Education.”
- ¹² British Columbia Ministry of Education (September 2002). “K-12 Funding – Aboriginal Education.”
- ¹³ Information based on interviews with Central Okanagan Public Schools’ Aboriginal District Principal and Acting Aboriginal District Principal, and on job description used by School District No. 28 – Quesnel (2006). “Principal – Aboriginal Education.”
- ¹⁴ Information based on interviews with ‘Aboriginal Advocates,’ ‘Aboriginal Support Workers,’ and “Job Description: Aboriginal Support Worker” (May 2009), used by School District No. 20 (Kootenay-Columbia).
- ¹⁵ Central Okanagan Public Schools (November 2017). “District Mission.”
- ¹⁶ Dei, George Sefa, Dr. (May 2015). “Reflections on “Dropping Out” of School.” *Education Canada Magazine*. EdCan Network.
- ¹⁷ For more information on Indigenous cultural ways of knowing or coming to learn or know, please see: “Q & A with Dr. Michelle Hogue” (2012). *Recipient of the 2012 Pat Clifford Award for Early Career Research*. EdCan Network, 1-2.
- ¹⁸ Central Okanagan Public Schools (October 2009). “Terms of Reference,” *Aboriginal Education Council Central Okanagan School District*. Note: Affirmed by the Aboriginal Education Council on 20 February 2014, and approved by the Board of Education on 26 February 2014.
- ¹⁹ For a complete list of action goals of Central Okanagan Public Schools’ second Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, please see: Central Okanagan Public Schools/School District 23 – Central Okanagan (January 2014). *School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan) Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement*, 22-23.
- ²⁰ British Columbia Ministry of Education (September 2002). “K-12 Funding – Aboriginal Education.”

- ²¹ “Learning Leadership Through the Seven Teachings.” Found in “Chapter 14: Together, We Empower Aboriginal Students of All Nations... to Lead.” Originally published in *Learning, Knowing, Sharing: Celebrating Successes in K-12 Aboriginal Education in British Columbia* (2017). Edited by Jo-ann Archibald, Q’um Q’um Xiiem, Jan Hare. Office of Indigenous Education/Indigenous Education Institute of Canada, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, and the British Columbia Principals’ and Vice-Principals’ Association (BCPVPA), 185.
- ²² Initially published in: Central Okanagan Public Schools – School District 23 (January 2014). *School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan) Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement*. Note : Image and goals based on second Enhancement Agreement, 6.
- ²³ Ibid., 17.
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- ²⁷ List of Council Membership accessible from: Central Okanagan Public Schools (October 2009). “Terms of Reference.” *Aboriginal Education Council Central Okanagan School District*. Note: Affirmed by the Aboriginal Education Council on 20 February 2014, approved by the Board of Education on 26 February 2014.
- ²⁸ Originally found in Mount Boucherie Secondary School (2018), *Grade 11/12 Course Planning Guide 2017/2018*, 8.
- ²⁹ Originally found in Mount Boucherie Secondary School (2018), *Grade 11/12 Course Planning Guide 2017/2018*, 9, 14, 20, 21, 23, 26. Accessible from: [www.mbs.sd23.bc.ca/ProgramsCourses/CourseOfferings/Documents/Grade 11-12 Course Selection Booklet Updated.pdf](http://www.mbs.sd23.bc.ca/ProgramsCourses/CourseOfferings/Documents/Grade%2011-12%20Course%20Selection%20Booklet%20Updated.pdf)
- ³⁰ Bissonnette, Steve (2014). “Efficacité des écoles et leadership des directions : L’un ne va pas sans l’autre!” *Magazine Éducation Canada*, 54(5), 36-377.



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